DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 392 858 UD 030 819

TITLE	A Tale of Two Nations: The Creation of American "Poverty Nomads."
INSTITUTION	Homes for the Homeless, Inc., New York, NY.
PUB DATE	Jan 96
NOTE	6p.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Economically Disadvantaged; Etiology; *Family Characteristics; Federal Legislation; *Futures (of Society); *Homeless People; *Housing Needs; Low Income Groups; *Poverty; Public Policy; Social Problems; State Legislation; Trend Analysis; Urban Problems

ABSTRACT

This report provides a snapshot of homelessness in America as it exists today, and as it can be expected to exist in the future. By further dismantling the safety net that protects many families living on the edge, policymakers will ensure that the numbers of homeless and destitute families increase, creating a new era of homelessness dominated by a growing class of "poverty nomads." Over 400,000 families are homeless now, with only 16% homeless due to one-time housing emergencies such as hazardous living conditions or financial hardships. Most lived with friends and relatives in crowded conditions. Once they lost those supports, shelters became the last option, with instability and impermanence as a way of life for many families. Homelessness has changed from an emergency-driven situation to a long-term, poverty-driven condition. New federal and state cuts will increase the numbers of nomadic poor, and the loss of housing will become a primary cause of homelessness. Finding new ways to maintain current levels of support can reduce the numbers of homeless families in the future. (Contains five figures.) (SLD)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 392 858

A Tale of Two Nations: The Creation of American Poverty Nomads.

Homes for the Homeless, Inc.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

I. Nunez
Homes for the Homeless

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

UD030819

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

A Tale of Two Nations

The Creation of American "Poverty Nomads"

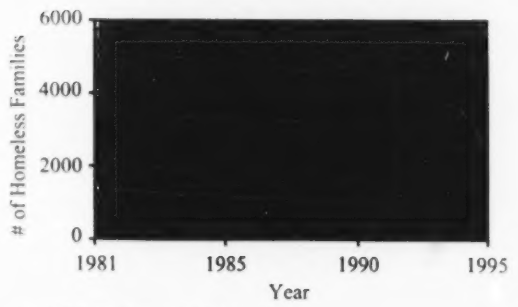
When her daughter was born, 17-year-old Alissa was forced to move out of her mother's home and in with her boyfriend. By 19, she was living doubled-up at her aunt's. Now, at 20, she is in a shelter. She and her child never had a home. They are part of America's "poverty nomads."

Homeless Families: *Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow*

As we near the turn of the century, homelessness will undergo a marked transformation and enter a new stage of unprecedented growth. After shifting from an emergency housing problem in the early 1980s to one of severe, sustained poverty in the 1990s, homelessness is now on the verge of taking yet another radical turn. Proposed cuts in federal and state assistance to the poor will destabilize millions of families and, ultimately, force tens of thousands *more* into homelessness.

Historically, one-time housing emergencies—fires, hazardous living conditions, personal calamities—have been the primary cause of family homelessness. Forced to abandon their homes, families required short-term emergency shelter until they were able to locate new housing. In 1982, however, the Reagan administration implemented systematic reductions in the national welfare safety net, and homelessness began to grow, taking on an entirely new dimension.

Figure 1: Increase in Family Homelessness, New York City (1981 - 1995)



Source: NYC Human Resources Administration

In New York City, the number of homeless families increased by more than 500 percent. Nationwide, an estimated 7 million Americans were homeless during the latter half of the 1980s.[4]

Today, children and families are the fastest growing subset of the homeless, representing a full 40 percent of the population.[1] On average, they are substantially younger, far less educated and poorer than homeless families of just ten years ago. In effect, federal cuts in the 1980s have *"notched down"* an entire generation into a chronic and debilitating poverty that claims homelessness as one of its most defining characteristics.

This report provides a snapshot of American homelessness today and a clear-sighted look at *homelessness tomorrow*.[2] With another round of sweeping cuts in government aid pending, we must examine their true impact. By further dismantling the safety net that now protects millions of families living on the edge, policy-makers will ensure that the number of homeless and destitute families continues to grow well into the future. In short, we will usher in a new era of homelessness dominated by a growing class of Americans—*"poverty nomads."*

A New Poverty

Today, over *400,000 families* are homeless. Another 2.5 million live doubled- and tripled-up with friends and relatives—just one step away from official homelessness. In New York City alone, family homelessness has increased by over *500 percent* since 1981 (see Figure 1).[3] In short, homeless families have become an entrenched element of everyday life.

Along with the sharp increase in numbers, significant changes have occurred in the demographics of these families. A typical homeless family in the early 1980s consisted of a middle-aged woman with adolescent children. Now it is a twenty-year-old mother with children under age six. Unlike her earlier counterpart, today's homeless mother has probably never been married, has an

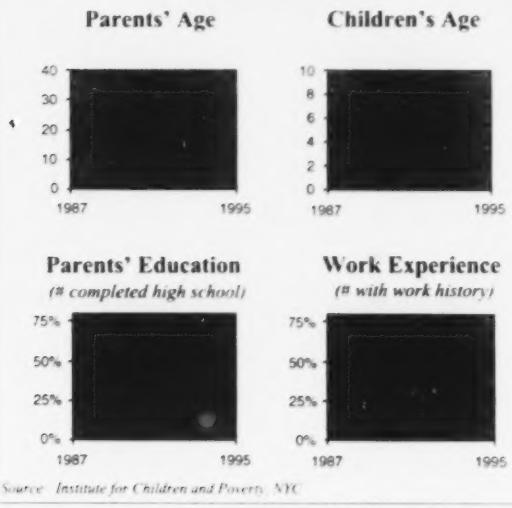
VD030819

© January 1996, **Homes for the Homeless, Inc.**

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

incomplete education and has never been employed (see Figure 2). While homelessness used to be a one-time experience of brief duration, today it is a long-term condition synonymous with an extreme new poverty that is engulfing a generation of young families.

Figure 2: Shifting Demographics of Homeless Families (1987-1995)



Source: Institute for Children and Poverty, NYC

By 1995, the average age of a homeless mother had dropped to 20 and her child's age fell to 3. The number of mothers who completed high school fell from 62 to 37 percent, while work experience declined by roughly a third.

These trends are key to understanding why families are flocking to shelters and why shelter beds are at capacity every night. No longer homeless for traditional emergency reasons, today's families are caught in a cycle of doubled-up housing, emergency shelters and homelessness.

In 1980 . . . *A fire forced Barbara and her fourteen-year-old son out of their apartment and into a shelter. One month later, with emergency aid, they were back in their own home.*

A Closer Look: *The Poverty Nomads*

The change in the characteristics of homeless families, along with their rapid increase in number, reflects the rise of a new class in America—one which may soon experience a surge of unparalleled growth. Recent data culled from families living in shelters reveals that their transience and instability have essentially rendered them *long-term "poverty nomads."*

Before entering emergency shelters most of these families moved continually, from one tenuous living arrangement to another (see Figure 3). And contrary to popular belief, *only 16 percent* became homeless due to one-time housing emergencies such as hazardous living conditions or financial hardships. Rather, before homelessness, most lived doubled- and tripled-up with friends and relatives in situations at times only slightly less chaotic than life in an emergency shelter. Once they exhausted those resources, a shelter became their only remaining option.

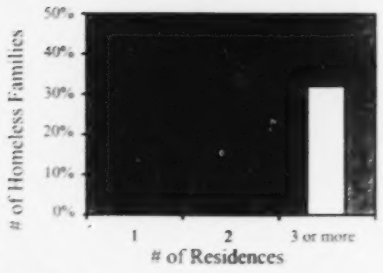
Specifically, prior to entering a shelter:

- *80 percent moved two or more times in a 12 month period;*
- *63 percent lived doubled-up with friends or relatives; and only*
- *15 percent lived independently in their own home or apartment.*

While some would argue that living doubled- or tripled-up is preferable to a shelter, the strains of living on the edge of homelessness clearly exacerbated already fragile family structures. In fact, *a number of homeless mothers reported having to relinquish at least one child to foster care just to maintain their doubled-up housing situation.*

Yet shelters and foster care are not new to many of these mothers. Twenty-two percent reported that they grew up in foster care themselves, often aging-out directly into the shelter system. Another 22 percent reported having lived in shelters as a child. In hindsight, it becomes clear that these systems have failed a generation of children and families. For the *nearly one in two* mothers who experienced the disruption of shelters or foster care as

Figure 3: Number of Residences in Year Prior to Homelessness



Source: Institute for Children and Poverty, NYC

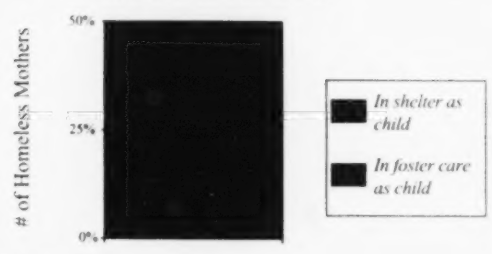
Eighty percent of homeless mothers moved two or more times in the year prior to becoming homeless.

children, the opportunity to develop responsibility and independence was lost (see Figure 4).

For these families, instability and impermanence are a way of life. And while their histories may help explain why they are homeless, the undeniable reality is that many of these mothers are now raising their children just as they themselves were—*surrendering some to foster care and raising others in shelters.* Given the chaos these systems can introduce into a child's life, *their* prospects for a stable and productive future are dim.

Nonetheless, *three in four* of today's homeless mothers reported that they have virtually no options other than the child welfare or shelter systems. Their transience has rendered them dependent, and emergency shelters have become their homes. In fact, if they do eventually make it to permanent housing, a staggering 50 percent *(one in two families)* return to the shelters in less than a year.[5]

Figure 4: Disruptive Childhood Experiences of Homeless Mothers



Source: Institute for Children and Poverty, NYC

Close to 50 percent of all homeless heads-of-household lived either in a shelter or in foster care as a child.

If the current systems of foster care and emergency shelter were created to help families in crisis, *they have failed.* Instead, they are breeding multi-generational dependency, with a significant and growing segment of the population knowing little else than *"nomadic poverty." Such solutions are no solutions at all.*

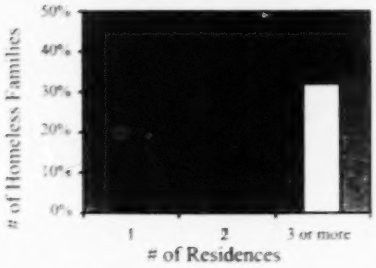
During 1995 . . . *20-year-old Alissa and her 3-year-old daughter Ashley have lived only in overcrowded living arrangements and shelters. Alissa never had the opportunity to develop responsibility and independence. If nothing is done, Ashley faces the same.*

Into the Future: *Homeless, Homeless and More Homeless*

Over the last fifteen years, homelessness has evolved from an obscure emergency-driven situation affecting few, to a long-term poverty-driven condition affecting many. And while policy-makers are still struggling to understand *this* marked transformation, additional changes lie just ahead.

The reality is that the ranks of today's *"nomadic poor"* are about to be swelled with hundreds of thousands of new homeless families. These families are now living independently—maintaining their housing with the aid of public assistance, housing subsidies or earned income tax credits.[6] Specifically, over one million families nationwide depend on both public assistance *and* housing subsidies to pay their rent and maintain independence, with several million more relying on at least one of these programs. And in New York City alone, *240,000 families* depend on housing supports. With a new round of federal and state cuts to these programs about to be implemented, an overwhelming number of families will find themselves forced from their homes and into emergency shelters—with scores of children potentially lost to foster care (see Figure 5).

Figure 3: Number of Residences in Year Prior to Homelessness



Source: Institute for Children and Poverty, NYC

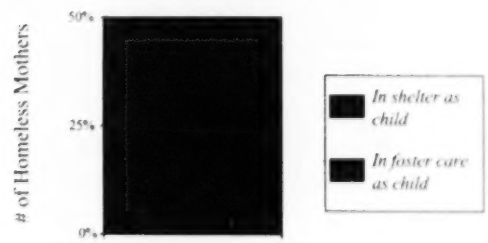
Eighty percent of homeless mothers moved two or more times in the year prior to becoming homeless.

children, the opportunity to develop responsibility and independence was lost (see Figure 4).

For these families, instability and impermanence are a way of life. And while their histories may help explain why they are homeless, the undeniable reality is that many of these mothers are now raising their children just as they themselves were—*surrendering some to foster care and raising others in shelters*. Given the chaos these systems can introduce into a child's life, *their* prospects for a stable and productive future are dim.

Nonetheless, *three in four* of today's homeless mothers reported that they have virtually no options other than the child welfare or shelter systems. Their transience has rendered them dependent, and emergency shelters have become their homes. In fact, if they do eventually make it to permanent housing, a staggering 50 percent *(one in two families)* return to the shelters in less than a year.[5]

Figure 4: Disruptive Childhood Experiences of Homeless Mothers



Source: Institute for Children and Poverty, NYC

Close to 50 percent of all homeless heads-of-household lived either in a shelter or in foster care as a child.

If the current systems of foster care and emergency shelter were created to help families in crisis, *they have failed*. Instead, they are breeding multi-generational dependency, with a significant and growing segment of the population knowing little else than *"nomadic poverty." Such solutions are no solutions at all.*

During 1995 . . . *20-year-old Alissa and her 3-year-old daughter Ashley have lived only in overcrowded living arrangements and shelters. Alissa never had the opportunity to develop responsibility and independence. If nothing is done, Ashley faces the same.*

Into the Future: *Homeless, Homeless and More Homeless*

Over the last fifteen years, homelessness has evolved from an obscure emergency-driven situation affecting few, to a long-term poverty-driven condition affecting many. And while policy-makers are still struggling to understand *this* marked transformation, additional changes lie just ahead.

The reality is that the ranks of today's *"nomadic poor"* are about to be swelled with hundreds of thousands of new homeless families. These families are now living independently—maintaining their housing with the aid of public assistance, housing subsidies or earned income tax credits.[6] Specifically, over one million families nationwide depend on both public assistance *and* housing subsidies to pay their rent and maintain independence, with several million more relying on at least one of these programs. And in New York City alone, *240,000 families* depend on housing supports. With a new round of federal and state cuts to these programs about to be implemented, an overwhelming number of families will find themselves forced from their homes and into emergency shelters—with scores of children potentially lost to foster care (see Figure 5).

If implemented, proposed federal and state cuts will:

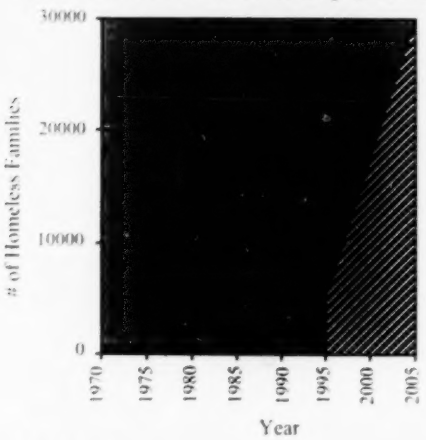
- ***Slash public assistance*** **by 26 percent;**
- ***Reduce food stamps*** **by one fifth;**
- ***Cut housing assistance*** **by 27 percent;**
- ***Deny Earned Income Tax Credits*** **to over 3 million families;**
- ***Push 1.5 million more children*** **on to the poverty rolls.**

These reductions would be *6 times* deeper than the deepest of the Reagan Administration's cuts.[7]

For the first time in a decade and a half, *the loss of housing will become a primary cause of homelessness.* Thousands of *new* families will be needlessly *"notched-down"* into dire poverty and forced into an over-burdened shelter system. With emergency shelters providing little more than food and beds, policy makers must rethink the impact of such draconian cuts in government aid.

For today's homeless, the answers lie in education-based solutions that emphasize job-readiness and skills development—cornerstones of independence and responsibility.[8] But the fate of tomorrow's homeless is *not* inevitable. *By finding new ways to maintain current levels of support, we can ensure that these families will not have to join the ranks of the "poverty nomads."*

Figure 5: Number and Projection of Family Homelessness, New York City (1970-2005)



Source: Institute for Children and Poverty, NYC

While the homeless family population increased substantially between 1981 and 1995, even more dramatic growth may lie ahead. In New York City alone, combined cuts in AFDC and housing subsidies could potentially force anywhere from 30,000 to over one hundred thousand families out of their homes.

Over a hundred years ago, Charles Dickens wrote *A Tale of Two Cities.* If we continue on our current course, by the turn of the century our federal government will have to shoulder the responsibility for having fast made this a "tale of two nations"—*the haves and the homeless.*

By 1997 . . . *Yolanda and Jeff had been raising their two sons in a Bronx apartment before they lost their housing subsidy. Now unable to afford rent, they must move into a shelter—sacrificing housing and independence.*

Notes

1. US Conference of Mayors, *A Status Report on Hunger and Homelessness in America's Cities: 1994* (Washington, DC: US Conference of Mayors, 1994).
2. This report is based on a 1995 survey of 193 homeless families living in shelters operated by Homes for the Homeless (HFH) in New York City. The survey was conducted by the Institute for Children and Poverty, the research division of HFH. Unless otherwise noted, all data presented is based on this survey.
3. Nancy Wright, "Not in Anyone's Backyard: Ending the Contest of 'Nonresponsibility' and Implementing Long-Term Solutions to Homelessness," *Georgetown Journal on Fighting Poverty* 2, No. 2 (Spring 1995), p. 170; US Bureau of the Census, *Current Population Survey, March Supplement 1994* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, March 1994); New York City Human Resources Administration, *Update to the Single and Family Shelter Statistics* (New York, NYC Human Resources Administration, March 1991).
4. US Department of Housing and Urban Development, *Priority: Home! The Federal Plan to Break the Cycle of Homelessness* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1994).
5. The New York City Commission on the Homeless, *The Way Home: A New Direction in Social Policy* (New York: NYC Commission on the Homeless, 1992).
6. Currently 5 million families (including 9.7 million children) rely on Aid to Families with Dependent Children, and 4.5 million families receive some form of housing assistance. Additionally, 20 million working Americans benefit from the Earned Income Tax Credit.
7. Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, *The Conference Agreement on the Welfare Bill* (Washington DC: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, December 1995).
8. For fuller descriptions of innovative, education-based policy solutions that have already proven successful in NYC and around the country, please see *Hopes, Dreams & Promise* by Ralph Nunez (New York: Institute for Children and Poverty, 1994) or *The New Poverty* by Ralph Nunez (New York: Insight Books, April 1996).

Homes for the Homeless (HFH) is the largest operator of *American Family Inns*—residential educational employment training centers—for homeless families in New York City. The **Institute for Children and Poverty** is HFH's research and training division. Homes for the Homeless's facilities include:

Clinton Family Inn (New York, NY) *Prospect Family Inn* (Bronx, NY)
Island Family Inn (Staten Island, NY) *Saratoga Family Inn* (Queens, NY)

Clinton Family Crisis Nursery (New York, NY)
Prospect Family Crisis Nursery (Bronx, NY)
Camps Kiwago & Lanowa (Harriman State Park, NY)

HOMES FOR THE HOMELESS
36 Cooper Square, 6th Floor
New York, NY 10003
(212) 529-5252

Ralph Nunez, President/CEO Leonard N. Stern, Founder

BEST COPY AVAILABLE